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Results of a pilot program in educational research and experimentation designed to raise standards of freshman and sophomore English composition at the University of Kansas show that program is measurably successful. Designed around a tightly planned curriculum, the program is based on a programed syllabus in conjunction with modified team teaching, a "casebook" of material for composition, cooperative grading by all members of the staff, and objective tests. The pattern of the course "moves from grammar to linguistics to rhetoric" in the study of sentence units and inductively in the study of the paragraphy. In reading it stresses style over substance. The course combines traditional content with "radical techniques of pedagogy."

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Freshman English at the University of Kansas: A Progress Report

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In the summer of 1960 the Department of English at the University of Kansas began a pilot program in educational research and experimentation, a project designed to raise the standard of instruction in English composition at the freshman-sophomore level. The recent entry of such private and public agencies as the College Entrance Examination Board and the U.S. Office of Education into analogous projects has underscored the timeliness of the Kansas project (underwritten by two research grants from university funds). Obviously then, since the will "to do something about English" fits the temper of the times, Kansans interested in education will want to know what has already been undertaken at the state university in Lawrence.

The dilemma facing the Department of English at Kansas is a familiar one at all levels of American education: how can more and more students be properly trained with fewer and fewer qualified teachers? The research staff (Professors W. P. Albrecht, E. D. Dykstra, J. W. Meixner, and K. S. Rothwell) became increasingly convinced that the answer may lie in prepackaging course materials to guarantee that even an inexperienced teacher can display reasonable *savoir-faire* in the classroom. In other words a heavier emphasis should fall on curriculum planning and development, and in-service training of teachers, and perhaps less weight should be attached to maintaining some arbitrary student-teacher ratio. From this perspective a kind of "third force" emerges which offers an option to steering between the Scylla of many small sections taught by unqualified teachers and the Charybdis of one mammoth class taught by an expert (with the assistance of graders). The "third force" presents a solution combining the virtues of a large class taught by an expert with a small class taught by a green but enthusiastic graduate student. The plan consists largely of a variation on the technique of "team-teaching" with special attention to constructing a central control pattern for a large number of separately taught sections. This report deals with the committee's findings on how such a plan should probably operate.

In a recent issue of *College Board Review,* Mr. Orville Palmer of the Educational Testing Service noted that "the English teaching profession even yet has not agreed upon the subject matter, teaching methods, and goals of its profession."[1] Unpalatable as these words may be, they have a certain corrosive truth when it comes to the matter of teaching composition to thousands of students both at the high school and elementary college

[1] Orville Palmer. "Sixty Years of English Testing." *College Board Review,* No. 42 (Fall, 1960) 8.

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level. At the University of Kansas, members of the Department of English felt that an attempt to solve this problem at the local level might contribute eventually to its solution at the national level. Therefore in redesigning the curriculum and teaching methods of Freshman English, the goals were a plan which would (1) insure some degree of success in the selection, training, and supervision of new teachers; (2) assure a relatively high degree of uniformity in curriculum, grading, and methods throughout all sections of Freshman English; and (3) establish some rationale for defining methods and goals in the teaching of elementary English. Such a plan had to be both rigid and flexible: rigid enough to demand an equal amount of work from all students, and flexible enough to undergo constant scrutiny and revision by the teaching staff.

The first requirement was the preparation of a syllabus which outlines a course in composition down to the smallest specifications, a task undertaken in the summer months of 1960 and 1961 by Professors Dykstra and Rothwell. The syllabus is designed not to enslave the teacher to an arbitrary curriculum but to free him for the creative task of meeting his students. The principle underlying the syllabus is, roughly speaking, one of "programming," a concept the committee did not have in mind at first but which it unwittingly and coincidentally stumbled into while searching for a method of sequencing the apparently intractable materials of a composition course. The student was to be taken step-by-step through what—as nearly as the committee could decide—were the essential steps in learning about writing. The result might be described as a "coarse-grained" program, which furnishes the data for a subsequent "fine-grained" program, when and if the resources for its development become available.[2]

The structure of the syllabus—three distinct units on the sentence, the paragraph, and organization—represents a distillation of the advice sought from all experienced teachers in the Department. A general agreement that the master plan should reflect the order within the materials themselves rather than personal whims of the staff helped to place the task on an empirical basis. Indeed failure to take a professional point of view toward the materials of a composition course would block any possibility of either writing a common syllabus or establishing a uniform program. Once, however, a principle of communal effort has been established, subsequent staff criticisms and analyses, by emerging on an objective rather than subjective basis, permit intelligent and helpful criticism of the semester's work. Therefore, the course

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[2] Cf. Lawrence M. Stolurow, *Teaching by Machine* (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare; Washington, D.C., 1961). Also, Lumsdaine and Glaser, *Teaching Machines and Programmed Learning* (National Education Association; Washington, D.C., 1960). K. S. Rothwell, "Programmed Learning: A Backdoor to Empiricism in English Studies," *College English,* XXIII (January, 1962), 245-50.

has been designed with a set of controlling principles in mind but with the idea of regular revisions within the framework of those principles.

Each unit in the syllabus follows, as it were, a pattern of definition, drill, and synthesis. That is to say, each lesson defines the rhetorical problem, reenforces the problem by exposing the student to drill, and finally makes an attempt to relate this experience to all the other lessons in the syllabus. In the sentence unit, for example, a review of traditional syntactical patterns (designed to refresh the memory of high school English), moves on to the sentence as viewed by the structural linguist (the five basic sentence patterns), and concludes with instruction in traditional rhetorical patterns (the loose, balanced, and periodic sentence, for example). The pattern in other words moves from grammar to linguistics to rhetoric. The second unit, on the paragraph, operates along inductive lines. Through a series of exercises the student is encouraged to discover for himself the principles of Unity, Coherence, and Development which go into the make-up of an effective paragraph. Practice materials range from exercises on Unity (which offer model paragraphs for analysis and stress the key role of the topic sentence) to exercises on Coherence (which present "scrambled" paragraphs or require fill-in of transitional phrases) to exercises on Development (which stress various devices for expanding the topic sentence). At the same time, to drive home the point that exercises are not an end in themselves but only a means to an end, the student receives a series of concomitant assignments in the writing of paragraphs. In other words, exercises which cannot contribute to improvement in writing proficiency have no place in this course.

What has been described so far sounds, and is, severely formalistic, even Alexandrine or Medieval, stressing manner completely to the exclusion of matter (indeed one observer noted that the Kansas Freshman English program combines the most conservative kind of course content with the most radical techniques of pedagogy). For average students, however, the contemplation of pure form is much too sophisticated a pastime. Moreover even the sternest rhetorician will sooner or later admit that the writing process must grow out of absorption in a subject matter, a situation acknowledged by Coleridge's doctrine of "organic unity." Consequently the problem arises of finding readings to stimulate student writing. To this end the staff has experimented with a series of controlled research pamphlets, or "casebooks," which provide ready-made materials for writing assignments. This kind of text, provided its materials are not so complicated as to distract attention away from rhetorical toward substantive matters, offers a solution to the problem of finding something for students to write about. An extra dividend is that casebooks also make plagiarism extremely difficult, for both teacher and student have access to the same sources. The casebook assumes a particular importance in the final unit of the course in connection with advanced problems in exposition.

At the same time reading assignments in the Kansas Freshman English course encourage discussions of problems in style rather than substance. Care is taken to assign a writer who employs highly stylized sentence structure when the unit on the sentence is in operation. Selections from Gibbons' *Decline and Fall,* for example, offer fine examples of the balanced sentence. When the periodic sentence is under discussion, the assignment might well be in a passage from Milton or Browne, both writers who knew how to suspend meaning effectively until the last possible moment. Class discussion in this way can be kept focused on the rhetorical problem rather than being allowed to drift off into "bull-sessions" on politics, free will, and baseball. The English teacher then adopts his proper role as an expert on questions of expression and resists the temptation to be led astray into garrulity on any and all topics.

The ideal solution to readings would lie in the direction of finding a casebook that offers interesting writing resources and at the same time effective models for rhetorical analysis. The Department experimented with Kreuzer and Cogan's *Studies in Prose Writing* (Holt, 1961), which arranges readings under rhetorical headings. While the text had certain advantages in focusing attention on rhetorical problems, many staff members felt at the same time that it artificially cut up and dismembered writing until it achieved a kind of hothouse status. The Kreuzer and Cogan approach to reading, however, is a salutary remedy for the opposite extreme of stressing matter entirely at the expense of manner.

The administration of the program represents a variation on the "team-teaching" approach which has recently received widespread attention from professional educators at the secondary level. Each new student instructor receives an assignment to a group led by a senior member of the Department staff. Throughout the semester both professor-in-charge and junior colleagues share a common responsibility for the teaching of the several hundred students in their various sections. With modifications to fit the limitations of classroom space and enrollment, the system works primarily within the framework of an exchange of class visits. That is, the instructor visits an early morning section taught by the professor-in-charge. There he sees and hears the unit called for by the syllabus. Later in the morning, he teaches his own section, following as closely as possible the guidelines laid down at the demonstration class. In rotation, the professor-in-charge visits the sections in his group and holds subsequent conferences with the teacher. The phrase "exchange of class visits" is used advisedly, for it would be an error not to emphasize the cooperative rather than supervisory nature of the relationship between the senior staff member and his junior colleagues. The stress on open class meetings also quickly accustoms the beginning teacher to thinking of classroom problems as professional rather than personal in nature.

The plan thus discourages the kind of bluffing which may occur when a teacher never invites the judgment of his peers.

One unexpected by-product of this standardization of classes was the discovery that substitutions for absent teachers could be made very readily, for each instructor's class preparation is identical. In emergencies, when mid-winter flu epidemics strike, it is even possible when necessary to combine two or three sections meeting at the same hour. Another advantage is that many of the clerical problems connected with teaching Freshman English can be handled by part-time student workers, thus lightening the load of overworked teachers.

An important feature of the program also is the exchange of themes among team members for grading. At weekly meetings, each member of the group (including the professor-in-charge) exposes the papers of his students to commentary and criticism by his colleagues. These grading sessions provide a basis for uniform grading standards, always a nagging problem in multiple-section courses. As a further check on theme-grading standards at least one theme during the semester is exchanged among the staff for an anonymous judgment by an outside reader. The subsequent discussion among instructors concerning the reasons behind the grade assignment stimulates much thought about common standards.

In the search for ways to achieve uniformity of grading standards, the Department also has experimented with a battery of objective tests on rhetoric, administered concomitantly with a theme assignment in an attempt to discover the correlation between achievement on objective tests and on essays. As might be expected, the results of this experimentation, carried out with the cooperation of Professor Gordon Collister, Mr. Cecil Williams, and Mr. William White of the Bureau of Guidance and Testing, were not definitive but at the same time they indicated trends which have been valuable in planning for the future. For example, it would seem apparent that on the average the student who performs well on an objective test also writes good themes (though exceptions to this rule are sufficiently frequent to signal caution in interpreting test results). Nevertheless an instructor gains a certain strength if he can show a class that the theme grades correlate reasonably with objective test scores. In designing these tests, which hopefully seek to measure rhetorical skills rather than mere ability in mechanics, the staff worked with inter-linears, with multiple-choice completions, and with scrambled paragraphs. Test design is, however, a specialty within itself that requires meticulous planning and development, sometimes beyond the resources of a single Department of English. Commercially prepared tests would be very useful, if they fitted precisely the Kansas syllabus.

To measure the effectiveness of the program for teaching rhetoric, the research committee set up experimental and control groups. The experimental group consisted of those sections taught in the centralized way described

above. The control group consisted of sections taught independently by both experienced and inexperienced assistant instructors. At the same time, other types of sections were also objectively tested as an additional check on the reliability of the measurement system. These groups included the honors sections (taught by senior staff members with doctorates), the remedial sections (taught by both junior and senior staff members), the sections of Freshman English handled by experienced assistant instructors, and the very small number of sections of English 1 taught by senior staff members.

One set of data showed that an identical test, administered at the first and last day of the semester, yielded a raw score for the experimental group of 11.19 on the first testing and 14.01 on the second testing. In the control group the initial mean raw score was 11.07 and the mean on the second testing 12.48. On the final examination in English 1, graded anonymously by outside readers, the statistics reveal similar differences. The mean score within the experimental group was 3.17, with 20.7 percent of the students failing the final (though not necessarily the course), while in the control group the mean score was 2.58, with 25.6 per cent of the students failing the examination. In other words, if these figures can be relied on, they suggest that the student in the experimental group had a slightly better chance of passing Freshman English than the student in the control group. Clearly for those students who were salvaged by the program, the expenditure of time and effort was worth while. The question also arises as to whether, with refinement and improvement of methods in the teaching of freshman rhetoric, the percentage of failing students might not be lowered.

A safe conclusion about the results of the project just outlined would be that a measurable though not overwhelming improvement in the teaching of freshman rhetoric came out of the program. More important, however, than the statistical results was the change in outlook which took hold of the research staff and the junior staff members engaged in teaching the various groups. In the very act of shattering old patterns and searching for new ones, a certain amount of intellectual excitement occurred which in many subtle ways filtered down into the classroom. Making the teaching of composition a challenge rather than a chore is really what the project is all about. If the teacher is enthusiastic, so then generally are the students. The great gaps are of course apparent. To bring about decisive improvement in writing skills, some way must be found to do a better job of motivating students. The students must come to think of writing as important; they must be eager to read widely; and they must come to think of the teacher as a person who will help them rather than persecute them. These and analogous problems have not been as yet completely solved, but the kind of spirit generated by this project at Kansas suggests that we are at least inching down the road toward their solution.